

https://statesville.com/news/local/article_82837500-05a5-11ec-80c3-7b89583550fb.html

ALERT

FEATURED

130 years later, the Bostian Bridge train wreck hasn't been forgotten

Ben Gibson

Aug 26, 2021



A train derailed Aug. 27, 1891, on the Bostian Bridge, killing 22 people and injuring 30. This photo was taken by Will Statesville from 1890 to 1929.

Photo courtesy of the Statesville Historical Collection

Ben Gibson

Church bells were ringing Aug. 27, 1891, but the tones weren't calling people to church just after 2 a.m. That morning, word arrived in Statesville that the Richmond & Danville No. 9 train carrying six rail cars had plummeted 60 feet off the Bostian Bridge. In total, 22 died as the train derailed while crossing over the Bostian Bridge that goes over Third Creek in Statesville.

The bells ringing served two purposes, according to local historian Steve Hill, who runs the Statesville Historical Collection on Center Street. It alerted those in Statesville something was wrong while also giving the survivors of the wreck direction of which way to walk back to down as the injured stumbled their way through the early morning darkness starting from present-day Buffalo Shoals Road.

Most of the reporting from the incident came from The Landmark editor J.P. Caldwell, who reported from the scene and had a messenger take the information back to be published in the paper later that day.

People are also reading...

- 1 **Police probe alleged child sex abuse, coverup at 'cult' church following news investigation**
- 2 **Lake Norman boys basketball coach Grant Hodges: Stepping down '100% my decision'**
- 3 **Former Iredell basketball star scores 18 as Buffalo wins Women's NIT Championship**
- 4 **Statesville brewery announces plans for second location**

"The most horrible disaster in the history of railroading in North Carolina occurred at 2 o'clock this morning at Bostian's bridge over Third Creek, two miles west of Statesville. At that hour west-bound passenger train, No. 9, which had passed Statesville on time at 1:52 a.m., was hurled from the top of the bridge a distance of 60 to 75 feet, the engine, tender, baggage and second class car, the first class coach, the

Pullman sleeper car “Saluda” and the private car of Superintendent R. R. BRIDGERS, all going overboard. The bridge was swept clear of iron from end to end,” Caldwell reported.

The train was headed to Asheville before it crashed into the creek below the bridge, smashing the train cars and killing many on board, including some who drowned after surviving the initial crash.

Because the first hospital in Statesville wouldn't be built until 1899, the 30 survivors were taken into local homes, where doctors came to attend to them. The dead were taken to the Farmers' Tobacco Warehouse that was on Meeting Street. The church bells, as well as the city's courthouse bell, would ring until sometime after 6 a.m. according to Hill, once daylight came and all of the casualties from the derailment had been brought to town.

The injuries from the wreck included A.L. Sink, of Lexington. His extensive injuries had him being treated in town for nearly two months after the wreck according to The Landmark.

“Mr. A.L. Sink, of Lexington, went home last Sunday evening. He is the last to get away of those who went down with the train at Bostian's bridge on the morning of the 27th of August. The train stopped at Mr. Jacob Bostian's house and Mr. Sink was lifted on board and made the trip home in comfort. His broken thigh is still encased in plaster paris but before leaving he was able to take a few steps, on crutches. The broken leg will be an inch shorter than the other, but it is likely that this is all there will be in a few months to remind Mr. Sink of the wreck,” the story from 1891 stated.

Why the train left the tracks happened was never quite settled, Hill said, and the evidence from the time doesn't conclusively point to any single cause.

While two men would be found guilty — they were already in the state prison but reportedly confessed the crime to other inmates — of removing spikes from the rails the train traveled on. J.A. Hand and Bird Shepherd would be the ones named responsible, but they weren't the only ones who claimed responsibility.

“There was a rash of hobo and tramp confessions across the state. Most were attempts to get locked up for a few days to get some jail food. But the two jailhouse confessions of Hand and Shepherd were the ones that stuck. The truth lies somewhere in between,” Hill said.

However, criminal misconduct wasn’t the only possible reason for the derailment.

The Richmond & Danville Railroad had fallen into hard times after the Civil War, which led to neglected maintenance of its rail lines. With the railroad lines not being properly maintained, speed could have been a factor in the disaster. William West, the train’s conductor, was 34 minutes behind schedule and looked to be in a hurry, according to witnesses as the train was traveling around 30 mph.

Hill said victims of the crash would end up being paid between \$1,200 and \$5,000 for death claims, while those injured were paid between \$1,000 and \$2,000. He said through insurance claims against the railroad, more than \$100,000 was paid out.

While only a few people boarded the train in Statesville, the tragedy left a mark on the city and hasn’t been forgotten over the years.

“If there was good to come out of it, Statesville received a lot of appreciation from the families of the deceased and the injured for their hospitality and going out of their way to make them feel comfortable,” Hill said.

A stain glass window at the Quaker meeting house on Walnut Street was donated by the family of one of the wreck’s survivors in a show of appreciation of Statesville’s kindness, Hill said.

The legends

A year after the wreck, the first reports of ghosts was reported when a group of people said they talked to a man that looked like Hugh K. Linkster, a baggage master killed in the wreck. They said he asked them for the time before vanishing before their eyes.

Another legend came 50 years later in 1941 when a woman waiting for her husband to return with a mechanic to attend to their broken-down car believed she heard a crash off the bridge over Third Creek. She supposedly heard the sounds of screams from passengers, but when her husband and the mechanic looked, they found nothing. They would head to town and would learn it was the 50th anniversary of the crash and on hearing this, the woman fainted.

Though not a legend and actual fact, a year later it was reported that a woman got her foot stuck on one of the bridge's crossties. She was on a walk with her husband and nephew, but after not being able to clear the track, the trio survived by lying flat, avoiding major injury.

The train wreck would claim one more life 119 years later, albeit indirectly, when a group of "ghost hunters" waited for the "ghost train" that had reportedly been seen over the years at the sight of the wreck. As they watched, a train did come. It was no ghost train, but a real Norfolk Southern one. Several people weren't able to clear the track in time, and Christopher Kaiser was killed while two others were injured.

According to several witnesses there and Kaiser's parents, he said "I love you," before shoving his girlfriend off the trestle in an effort to save her. She fell nearly 30 feet but survived.

Follow Ben Gibson on Facebook and Twitter at @BenGibsonSRL

22 In All

We bowed our heads in silence as the first of them arrived

A wagon carrying a preacher, with a Bible by his side

A young girl held her mother's hand; both had lost their shoes

A couple from this county; the rest just pa-assin' through

On any other day they'd been a most unlikely lot

From Pittsburg 'n Chicago 'n small-town whistle-stops

A newlywed, a farmer, some dressed up business men

Just outside'a Statesville their journey home begins

The tolling of the church bells offered respite to the souls

Of those strangers as they made their way up Buffalo Shoals Road

The news of their arrival spread down Center Street and Broad...

Lost way-far-ing passengers—22 in all

Well, the westbound train to Asheville had built a head-of-steam

When it jumped the Bostian trestle, and plunged down in the creek

The lucky ones died quickly, thu less fortunate ones drowned

Gently they were gathered up and hauled back into town

The tolling of the church bells offered respite to the souls

Of those strangers as they made their way up Buffalo Shoals Road

The news of their arrival spread down Center Street and Broad...

Lost way-far-ing passengers —22 in all

One by one they-were gathered at this makeshift city morgue

Where they lie in silent darkness, across the warehouse floor

Waiting for their families or-one last conductor's call...

For their final destination...there were 22 in all.

The tolling of the church bells offered respite to the souls

Of those strangers as they made their way up Buffalo Shoals Road

The news of their arrival spread down Center Street and Broad...

L-ost way-far-ing passengers — 22 in all

A song by Steve Hill, written in 1998

By Ben Gibson

Reporter
